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ABSTRACT

Noting that success defines the American identity, this ethnographic case study examined the dynamics of culture, spirituality, and success in the lives of three generations of three Cambodian families. The study pursued three research objectives: (1) to challenge the dominance of quantitative measures to judge refugee students' academic success; (2) to expand understanding of the role of grandparents and community elders in modeling expectations of success; and (3) to illuminate the power of spiritual belief systems to inspire perceptions of success not part of normative culture. Participating in the 3-year study were 3 families comprising 28 people from the Cambodian refugee community in an eastern metropolitan area. Data were collected by means of participant observations and interviews. Categories of success were derived from crafted profiles. All participants read their profiles to improve interpretive validity. The findings illustrate that Khmer grandparents convey a cultural model to grandchildren emphasizing a Theravada Buddhist epistemology, focusing on living in the present, balancing wisdom with compassion, and finding one's own path or "karma." Parents varied in their degree of Americanization and in their perceptions of success. Although parents hold firm to the concept of karma, they have added American concepts such as equal opportunity, higher education, and secure middle-class jobs. The most important criteria for a successful life continues to be maintenance of the family bond. The adolescents are cognizant of the actions which bring merit to them and their families and strive to meet those expectations. Findings pose implications for education related to religious pluralism. (Contains 22 references.) (KB)

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A Cultural Epistemology of Success:
Perspectives from Within Three Cambodian Families

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Concepts of success are prevalent in American culture and are a defining quality of the American identity. There is a tendency in studies using statistical analysis of educational attainment and achievement to focus on the American measures for success as the exclusive benchmark which everyone must reach. Thus immigrant groups which are able to find within their cultural codes, those patterns which synchronize with independent work habits, competition, delayed gratification, and desire for individual achievement will generally do well in the American environment.

The purpose of my research was to learn more about the dynamics of culture, spirituality, and success in the lives of three generations of three Cambodian families. I sought to answer the question, what does it mean to be successful within Cambodian culture from the perspective of the adults and the adolescents in these three families? My work undertook three objectives, first, to challenge the dominance of quantitative measures as the exclusive criteria for judging the academic success of refugee students; second, to expand our understanding of the role that grandparents and community elders, in particular, play in modeling expectations of success for the adolescents within their community, and finally, to illuminate the power of spiritual belief systems to inspire perceptions of success that are not commonly a part of normative school culture.

For the purpose of this presentation I shall focus on the ways in which some of the adolescents in my research are inspired by their Buddhist beliefs and traditions to meet their family's expectations of what a successful person should be.

Setting

My research with the Cambodian community in Forest City began almost eight years ago, and is still ongoing. Forest City has approximately 65,000 people in the metropolitan area and is located on the New England coast. The City has a strong economy with a wide range of entry-level industrial, marine-based and service jobs, small businesses, and high-end corporate and professional occupations. It has an equally wide range of public and private schools, a local division of the state university and two technical colleges. In addition, there is an unusually large and sophisticated arts community that serves the southern part of the state.

Today the refugee community, which includes people from 47 different linguistic groups, makes up about five percent of the population. The other ninety-five percent are Anglo-Europeans. Refugees from Southeast Asia began arriving in 1975 with the Vietnamese; the Cambodians came as part of the third wave primarily in 1981 through 1983. Less than four percent of highly educated Cambodians survived the Pol Pot genocide, and the majority who arrived in Forest City were civil servants, small shop owners, farmers and fishermen; the majority of them were women with children. Today the Cambodians comprise the largest discrete ethnic community in Forest City due to secondary, internal migration from other parts of the United States The community supports a small Buddhist Center, frequently housing two monks, which organizes a variety of Buddhist celebrations throughout the year, a classical Cambodian dance company, and a classical music ensemble.

Sample

I met my key informant Pirun in 1992 through a contact at the state department of education. He has since introduced me to more than 50 members of the Cambodian community and a number of Buddhist monks who care for the temple. I conducted a pilot study from 1995 to 1996 with seven families and from this group, I selected three families representing a total of

28 people to be a part of my thesis research. The criteria I used for selection were that families would be either dual parent or single parent and that they would include at least three generations living together or nearby. Because I cannot speak Khmer, it was important that some members of the family be bilingual. In order to observe the resilience of Cambodian beliefs and practices over time, I looked for families which had been in the United States for more than ten years, and had considerable experience with American schools, from primary through high school. Finally, I looked for families who were not only willing to spend at least three years working with me, but who were particularly insightful and reflective of their own experiences.

Data Collection

Given that the research is an ethnographic case study, the methods of data collection depended primarily on participant observation and interviews (Stake, 1995). I completed over 70 hours of formal interviews with the four parents, two grandparents, and seven adolescents; informal conversations have been ongoing weekly for six years. Participant observations which have averaged twice a month for five years included shadowing each of the adolescents for a full day in school, helping to teach citizenship classes, tutoring with school work and attending numerous family and community celebrations.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data using contextualization in the form of crafted profiles, analytic memos and narrative summaries (Seidman, 1998; Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I derived four categories of success from the Profiles (individual, the family, Cambodians , and Americans); the narrative summaries were developed from the profiles and my field notes. Using the Profile categories, I developed a group of codes such as "expectations," "self-reliance," "between two worlds," and "getting ahead." The codes were arranged in a series of thematic matrices for each individual and included text from their profiles. Finally, I used

concept maps to illustrate the relationships among the categories before developing my grounded theories of what it means to be successful for the individuals and the families in my study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Validity

Descriptive validity was accounted for by the extensive ethnographic detail gathered in field notes over eight years of interactions. Interpretive validity was approached through two series of member checks in which each participant read his or her profiles and participated in follow-up interviews to clarify points raised in the profile. Focused participant observation over a two year period provided an additional validation to the statements made in the interviews. Theoretical validity has been accounted for by comparing my grounded theory with the findings from my pilot study of this community and with the literature on this topic written by Cambodian scholars (Welaratna, 1993; Ebihara, 1994; Sin, 1991; Bit, 1981).

Theoretical Framework

Since 1984, scholars such as Rumbaut and Ima (1988, 1995) have revealed a great diversity in achievement among Southeast Asians. The authors claimed that Cambodians (in the San Diego area) tended to have lower status jobs, to have more families living on public assistance in which the adults were illiterate in their own language and unable to speak English. Moreover, their children tended to place among the lowest of all the Southeast Asian groups on standardized tests, grade point averages, and graduation rates (Rumbaut, 1995). Given the dismal academic statistics for the Cambodian students in their study, Rumbaut and Ima theorized that the Cambodian cultural beliefs which value non-competition, present-time orientation, a concern with personal happiness and with helping others do not inspire young people to be as successful in school as their Vietnamese peers.

Peter Kiang offers another perspective in his study of Southeast Asian college students. He found that the students' expectations for success tended to reflect values rooted in cultural beliefs. Kiang claimed that in order to understand the variation among Cambodian, Laotians, Vietnamese and Hmong to complete four years of college, it is important for the educator to be aware of "the roles of race, culture and class in shaping the self-image, aspirations, process of adjustment and development of a minority group identity for Southeast Asian refugee students, and . . . to explore the meaning of success and the realities of survival as defined through the daily lives of immigrant and refugee students" (Kiang, 1991:48).

The work of psychological anthropologists such as Shweder, 1991; LeVine, 1986; Suárez-Orozco, 1989, 1995; Holland and Quinn, 1987; Shore, 1996, and D'Andrade, 1987 emphasizes that certain cultural beliefs, those that construct identity and reality, become a part of an individual's deep cognitive processes. The child who is raised in a tradition which teaches that one's actions in this lifetime are accounted for in a future lifetime, will adhere to this version of reality even in the face of contradiction and discrimination. Because Buddhism has been synonymous with Cambodian culture for nearly 2000 years, it is safe to say that Cambodian identity will continue to be shaped by concepts of karma and the eight-fold path.

Findings and Interpretation

The cultural models which are passed along from Khmer grandparents to their grandchildren come out of a Theravada Buddhist epistemology. Unlike Confucian Buddhism, which is common to the Vietnamese and the Chinese, Theravada Buddhism is found primarily in Southeast Asia and the beliefs are related to their roots in Indian culture. Venerable Maha Ghosananda, Cambodia's supreme patriarch, describes the Cambodian Way as living in the present moment, and balancing wisdom with compassion. A person becomes wise by learning from teachers and books as well as from personal experience in the world. A person learns

compassion by practicing generosity and loving-kindness without expecting a reward. The foundation of the culture is built on the concept of karma and reincarnation. The actions in a past life influence all subsequent lives, so karma explains why one person is middle class in this lifetime and another is a beggar. Because of karma, Khmer parents feel that their children have an innate destiny and so strongly encourage their children to find their own path.

The elders in these families include Long and Soun, Rath's mother and father, Yeang, Pirun's mother-in-law and a long-time friend of Chinda's who served as a surrogate grandmother to April and Mam until she died of cancer. Yeang and Long are in their seventies; both were involved in family businesses in Cambodia and both were highly respected in their community. Neither grandmother attended school past the sixth grade; both are monolingual Khmer speakers and can read and write the language.

As the top of her extended family, Yeang has taught all of her grandchildren the proper way to respect their elders, and she is also gifted in interpreting dreams. Her granddaughters, Avy and Alyana, have come to depend on her intuition and wisdom. Yeang cautions Avy and Alyana about choosing friends they can trust. She warns them that staying out late and being seen in the company of young men is harmful to their reputation and a potential source of concern to the whole family. She instructs MP in the role he must undertake as the oldest child (and son) in the family. As he grows older, Yeang reminds MP that he must learn the Buddhist ceremonies that guarantee a future life for his parents, and she encourages him to spend his time at the temple to acquire the knowledge of Buddhism much as he acquires the knowledge of mathematics.

In spite of the fact that both grandmothers' frame of reference is rooted in an early twentieth-century Cambodian reality which makes them very traditional thinkers, they are both referred to as the person the children most admire. Because they are in the third stage of life,

they are able to spend all of their time helping their families or helping in the community and as a result their perspective of what it means to be a successful individual carries a lot of influence with their grandchildren.

Pirun, his wife Ran, Chinda, her ex-husband Soun, and Rath are successful individuals and parents on a variety of levels. Pirun and Chinda are both college educated. They are fluent in English and Khmer and they both work or have worked in white collar jobs. However, Pirun owns his own home and Chinda lives in subsidized housing. Pirun is highly respected in the Cambodian community for his intelligence, his good deeds and his knowledge of Buddhism. Chinda has an uneasy relationship in the Cambodian community, and while she is respected for her learning she is criticized for her independence. Ran, Soun and Rath are not literate in Khmer and their English skills are modest, which accounts for the fact that they work in manufacturing and seasonal employment. Ran and Rath are devout Buddhists and are considered high praise in the community for the way they practice their faith and for the way they have raised their children.

The parents generally follow the cultural model of "not too strict and not too loose." Rath is very protective of her daughter Srey's reputation, and she is strict with all her children about school. Still, Rath believes it is important to welcome change when the situation requires change. Rath agrees with an American model that supports equality of opportunity for women, and she is grateful that she no longer lives in a society which requires her to remain with an abusive husband. So she listens to her children and keeps an open mind.

> [In America] woman really free, and I say it is very good. In my country . . . when a woman have one husband and they get divorced, [the community look down on you.] I don't like that way. Cambodians want to have a good future, but we cannot stand on old ways, we have to change. Some family who are old, like my mom, they are very hard to change [the old religious ways]. But the young, my daughter's age, they change, they not stay the same. I think some choices in life are open and it is very good for the person. Sometimes it is good to be change.

Rath also believes that the most successful person is the high education person. She has gone out of her way to place her children in the best and most challenging academic programs she can find in Forest City. With the help of her extended family and her children, she will see Touch and Srey graduate with honors from exclusive private high schools.

> I admire high education person who really get high education and who is really respectful to the family, obey the parents, is respectful to elders and just don't take education for granted.

Chinda is the most Americanized of the four parents. Her perception of success is to be free and independent and she has instilled this model in her daughter and to some degree in her son. But Chinda still idealizes the family as a central Cambodian institution. She condemns the family that spends all of their time working or gossiping and ignoring their children. Yet, because of her desire to complete her education, Chinda has struggled to balance school, work and still maintain some control over her children. Since the study was completed, Chinda and her ex-husband have reunited, and for the first time, this family is becoming closer and more stable.

These parents hold firm to the most basic Buddhist philosophy, the concept of karma, and the teachings of the monks about compassion, generosity and loving-kindness. They have added American concepts of success such as equal opportunities for men and women, higher education, and secure, middle-class jobs. However, the most important criteria for a successful life is to maintain the bond of the family. The success of the family reflects on the aspirations and achievements of the children, and likewise, the success of the children brings high status to the family. As Pirun states,

> Cambodian life is set up by a culture frame which is the norms and values of a good child of the family. You have to respect the family, take advice seriously so the family won't lose face among community members. It is a frame which leads the people to become the best person now.

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There are eight adolescents in this study, and it has been a primary objective to document the ways in which they have internalized the models of success held by their grandparents and parents. Pirun's children, MP, Avy and Alyana, are fluent in Khmer and English although none of them can read or write the language. They spent less than two years in ESL classrooms in predominantly white elementary and middle schools. All three have attended or will attend Forest City High School which is the most racially diverse high school in the city. Although they refer to the experience as "culture shock," they seem to have welcomed the opportunity to mingle with American and other refugee students. Nonetheless, MP and Avy talk about the daily incidents of racism that stereotype them along with other students of color as "non-achievers" or gang members.

MP perceives success as a "rags to riches" contest with himself. He strives to better himself so that he can better society. As a high school senior, MP was under tremendous time pressure to succeed and secure the scholarships he needed to attend college. Today he plans his future from stage to stage, recognizing that because his family is not wealthy, they cannot provide him with a financial safety-net so he must achieve his success on his own. His fear of getting stuck in Forest City or falling back on his family's resources, keeps him moving toward his goals, while at the same time looking for inner fulfillment as he completes each stage.

> I respect the person that had nothing, kind of rags-to-riches story, had nothing and made something of himself. [Rags-to-riches] people, they have that self-drive because they lack the safety-net. They can't fall back on their parents because their parents aren't wealthy. Who else can they turn to but themselves?
>
> Fulfillment right now would just be doing good in college then getting a good job. But then when I get to that point, that's not going to be enough fulfillment for me, so then I have to look about my family, my parents, about money. So that's a different part that I have to fulfill. So it is kind of like goals.

For MP, Avy and Alyana, their standard for success is the family; they do not concern themselves with trying to fit into the American mainstream. They are confident and rooted in

their ethnic identity and still willing to compete in American society. Even though MP is driven to achieve, he tries to balance his ambition with maintaining a close connection to his family,

> I think Cambodian culture is more a family aspect. You are always surrounded by your family so you always have that kind of group around you. The older I get things that were a privilege before, they get a little bit more important. Your parents get more important, the religion.

Rath's older children, Kusal, Touch and Srey, have taken different paths in terms of academic success, but in terms of being a good person, all three have excelled equally. All three adolescents speak fluent Khmer and English although none of them read or write the language. Kusal and Srey are devout Buddhists and have spent most of their lives attending temple and festival celebrations. Srey has studied Classical Cambodian dance since she was in fifth grade and Kusal was married two years ago in a traditional three-day ceremony conducted by a monk.

Kusal had little success as a student because he entered school at age eight without any previous classroom experience, and because the teaching staff was unskilled in working with non-English speakers. The stress of not understanding the language, the racism, and the fear of having to fit into the white mainstream, caused Kusal to drop out of school and "go wherever life led him."

Age and maturity have altered Kusal's perceptions of what it means to be successful by Cambodian standards – he and his wife will have their first child in August, and they both have full-time jobs in an electronics manufacturing plant. For Kusal, leading a fulfilling life in which he balances fun and work, responsibility and play is better in his mind, than competing for goals that are too high and too stressful.

> Success people could be you or me as long as they accomplish their goals in life. Wealthy people not really success. Yeah, they success but they not happy. I would rather be happy, you know, poor happy. [I would rather have] a full happiness, something that our family have. We don't need a million dollars to be successful, successful is in our own mind. As long as you are happy, successful is everywhere in yourself.

Touch and Srey left the ESL classroom after a year and entered mainstream classes, often as a minority of one. Like Kusal they fought against the racism from fellow students and from teachers, but unlike Kusal, and with the help of their mother, they both ended up going to private high schools. This experience has resulted in a slightly different perspective of success than that held by MP, Avy and Alyana. While they have not been stigmatized as a member of a low-achieving group in these environments, the disparity in social class has powerfully influenced their perceptions of success.

Touch, like MP, aspires to reach high in education, but is aware that his family provides him with no financial safety-net, and so he must be responsible for securing his future goals. This contrast has been exacerbated by the fact that unlike MP, some of Touch's close friends are from wealthy families whose parents can underwrite their expenses while they take a year off before attending college. Now that he is in college, Touch has sought out international students with whom he can be himself and who have the same hunger to achieve that he does. Touch is highly motivated to help people and he looks for opportunities to open the door to other minorities who have also worked hard to get ahead.

> At [Danforth school] we get a lot of kids who have the luxury to do whatever they want. It is kind of sad because there are inner city kids that don't have the luxury of that. There is not a [safety] net for them. My wealthy friends are just oblivious to the fear [of failure]. They don't see this fear of failure become most of them pretty much have a safety net. For the Asian community the fear [of failure] is like not being able to make it; to be able to do something that has meaning to your life or something that gives credibility. I just want to do something that is able to give back . That could be whatever job is available that is appealing and can offer me a chance of some freedom to do things for the community. I just want to see if I can help minorities. I know everybody has to overcome hardships but minorities have that extra step or two with the language and just trying to get their foot in the doorstep.

Srey is as highly motivated as her brother in seeking to prove to her classmates and her private school teachers that a Cambodian woman can make the honor roll, write brilliantly in English, succeed in anatomy class, and be accepted into a competitive private college. She

strives to prove that a Cambodian woman can voice her opinions and stand for what she believes even within a cultural framework that traditionally denies this to women.

April and her brother Mam are the least alike of the eight. Because April was born in the United States, she considers herself an American. She has grown up in a housing development surrounded by other Cambodian families and yet she has had few Cambodian friends over the years. Neither April nor Mam speak Khmer and they understand very little of what elderly Cambodians say to them. They do not attend the temple or any other Buddhist celebrations. April rejects her Cambodian identity since being Cambodian has only brought her criticism and gossip from the members of the Cambodian community.

> I'm just a regular teenager. I don't know much about Cambodian culture, I grew up around all white kids, so it's not really important to me to have a Cambodian identity. Cambodian Way have less freedom. My American friends, they can go outside, they can do anything, but when it's my Cambodian friends, they can't come out, they can't do anything. They have to obey the Cambodian rules, like watch the kids, cook, clean the house. They can't go outside on weekends, they can't go outside period.

Prior to their family being reunited, April and Mam struggled to find a place to belong. They idealize the family which takes time to listen to their children, where there is a close bond and a set of appropriate boundaries. Because this has not been her family, April has sought out American adults who can guide and mentor her. Inspired to some extent by her mother, and her mentors, April is a highly motivated student. She transferred from Forest City High School in her freshman year in order to attend the majority white Stevens High School, and she has been on the honor roll for most of her sophomore, junior and senior years.

It is my claim that the epistemology of success as perceived by these three families finds its genesis in a metaphysical knowing which is articulated consistently in relationship to their spiritual and cultural traditions. The adolescents, in particular, must hold two concepts of the world in their minds – the secular world and the world which contains their religious values.

They must learn the knowledge of facts in order to get ahead in the American system; but they must also acquire knowledge of the reality that defines them as Cambodian.

More often than not these adolescents encounter a society which demands that they not waste time, that they compete for limited resources, that they must know facts and not themselves, and that they must help themselves at the expense of helping others. While Buddhist philosophy is similar to other spiritual traditions, the point to consider is the depth to which Buddhism inspires these young Cambodians to aspire; to become successful as Cambodians and Americans. Good actions are connected to a good reputation. Their good reputation is connected to the status of the family which earns respect, admiration (and envy), much like what happens to people who become very successful. Their faith tradition inspires them to care for and about others. It is the motivation for personal merit, it is the substance of role models, it is the most important element in career choice, and it is the foundation of the good family.

Each person in this study speaks about her or his relationship to Buddhism and its meaning in his or her life. While a few do not connect these values to being Buddhist, they nonetheless, behave as their devoutly Buddhist parents have instructed them. On some level each person understands that every action in life produces a consequence for the actor, that the consequences, whether good or bad, are not resolved in one lifetime, and must follow the individual into the next life. The law of karma, even imperfectly understood, is a potent part of their belief system, and reoccurs over and over in their narratives.

The adults give of their time and resources with a full and warm-hearted generosity. They believe this will bring them merit in the next life. The adolescents are cognizant of the actions which bring merit to them and to their families and they strive to meet those expectations. Far from being fatalistic, I believe that their interpretation of Buddhist philosophy motivates them to "catch the best future life" by achieving their goals but not at the expense of

being generous to their families and compassionate to others. They strive for the future, but they live in the moment.

The adolescents who continue to speak Khmer are able to understand the meanings behind the cultural traditions instilled by their grandparents, and even though they chafe against rules that seem old-fashioned and arbitrary in American society, they intuitively accept the rationale behind them. For the most part, the family is low stress (at times), it is fun, it is supportive, it is the role model. The adolescents, reciprocate as culture brokers and provide for their families as they get older.

Balance in all things is a core Cambodian cultural model. The way in life should be balanced between too much stress and complete disorganization – the middle path. Too much success brings worry about how to manage it all. Too much wealth is a burden just as too much poverty is a burden. The goal is personal and emotional fulfillment which is not achieved through material things but with making the people in your life proud of you. In MP's words,

> Money can take you certain places, but it's what is inside of you that will bring you to another plateau. I think we have to conquer ourselves first. Kind of like Americans are constantly going out but they are not looking within. Material things can bring a certain amount of fulfillment, but it is just not going to bring you complete fulfillment. I think it just comes down to what makes the people who care about you proud of you. That feeling drives a lot of people. I know when I graduate college and I get a job, [my family] is going to be really proud. If your friends are proud of you; if they are happy with the kind of person you are; you see the smile on their faces when you do something good, your family, your friends. You can't help but want to put that smile on their face more.

Implications for Education

At the turn of the century Puritan ideas of self-reliance along with the humanist ideals of service to others were a more explicit part of public school curriculum, and even today are embedded in the philosophy of American education. Many educators have lost sight of how closely our Calvinist theology is linked to the values that currently define what it means to be

successful in this society. Classrooms today, however, are full of students whose cultural traditions are not those of Anglo-European origin.

I recently had the privilege of reviewing 104 applications from teachers who wanted to attend a National Endowment for the Humanities summer institute focused on religious pluralism in America. In essay after essay, novice to veteran teachers described their strong desire to understand in greater depth, the religious traditions of the students who were now part of their classrooms. Formerly exclusive private Catholic girls schools, like the one Srey attended, have decided to include curricula in global studies, world civilizations, and world geography in which religious literature, history, philosophy, art and music from all the world's cultures is fully and respectfully represented. Clearly, practitioners are realizing not only how important it is to know about the traditions of Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, or Buddhism in order to enhance their relationships with students from these faiths, but even more important is the need to deepen the understanding of Christian students about these religions in order to build a foundation of respect instead of hate.

Another resource for educators who are interested in constructing a curriculum that builds on cultural models such as compassion, generosity, and collaboration can be found in Nel Nodding's book *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (1992). The value of caring is not unique to Cambodians, however, because it is so consistently instilled in Cambodian young people as a way of acquiring merit for one's next life, they are strongly inspired by environments where this value is an explicit norm. I have met so many young Khmer who spend time tutoring their brothers and sisters, or tutoring other refugee students who live in the city's housing projects. A curriculum that is organized around themes of caring and service, would certainly support a powerful cultural model, and validate students for whom that way of life comes naturally.

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